CHRISTMAS DAY
DECEMBER 25, 2011

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There was an editorial on the opinion page of the *Wall Street Journal* on Friday with the headline, "No Church This Sunday – It's Christmas." Apparently 10% of the Protestant churches in the nation are closed today. And many churches that are open for business are doing something different. A Baptist church in Halifax, Virginia, is "planning a short service featuring bluegrass riffs on Christmas music. A Catholic church is holding a "Jingle Bell Mass" according to the *Journal*.

In a minister's household, Christmas Day coming on Sunday does create problems. Christmas Eve is pretty much shot what with children's pageants and candlelight services from late afternoon to midnight. And then, when Christmas Day is a Sunday more logistical challenges emerge. Shall we all get up very early and open gifts and have breakfast before church? Or shall we postpone the gifts until later – an unbearable burden for young ones who have their own ideas about how to resolve the conflict.

> "We're not having church on Christmas, are we?
> "Yes, we are."
> "You're not going to make us go, are you?"
> "Yes, your mother and I thought we'd all go together."
>
> And the bottom line:
> "You're not going to preach, are you?"

Again, "Yes, I'm afraid so." I tell them that Presbyterians feel cheated if they go to church and there is no sermon and I don't like any Presbyterians feeling deprived on Christmas morning, so yes, I'm preaching.

But there's also good news. It won't be for very long.

Worship on Christmas Day is a long standing Fourth Presbyterian Church tradition, whether it falls on Sunday or not and the dinner afterward, enjoyed by a wonderfully diverse family gathered around the tables.

I learned the value of that tradition on my first Christmas here in 1985. Because I was new I assigned myself the preaching responsibility: it was not on Sunday morning that year and I wondered who would come to church on Christmas morning. I was surprised at the number who came and for whom being here and being at the table afterward was important. Among the worshippers that morning was a Lufthansa Air Lines flight crew, in uniform.

They had flown into Chicago the day before, checked into the Westin and were flying home that afternoon. But they were missing Christmas in their homes and with their families, discovered that there was worship and dinner here and decided to come together on their way back to the airport.

It is not, I concluded a long time ago, the occasion for a typical sermon – when Christmas lands on Sunday. For one thing many of the congregation were in church just twelve hours earlier and heard a sermon and many were in church for the four Sundays of Advent and it is clear to them, if not the preacher himself or herself, that the supply of sermon material is not inexhaustible – that by December 25th the preacher has pretty much said what he has to say.

And so it's a fine day to look elsewhere for content and that is what we have done.

My favorite non-sermon Christmas literature includes – *Why the Chimes Rang*, a children's book my parents took turns reading to me. It's about two little boys, brothers, who have wanted to go to the great cathedral on Christmas Eve, to see the beautiful spectacle, to hear the music, the powerful organ, and watch the wealthy nobility of the kingdom who on Christmas Eve brought their gifts to the altar. The boys had heard that once in a very great while, once in a generation, there is a gift so generous, so wonderful, that the chimes in the church tower, high above the clouds, actually ring. It's a long way and the boys set out on the day before Christmas. They've brought some scraps of bread to eat along the way. On the way to the Cathedral, on Christmas Eve, in a deep snow, the brothers come upon an older woman, fallen in the snow. They stop and realize their dilemma – they can't leave her to die in the snow. But they've been waiting so long and besides they have one small coin they've been saving that they planned to place on the altar. The older brother decides: he will stay with the woman, try to keep her warm and feed her the piece of bread in his pocket. Little brother will go on alone – see it all, and when the time comes, quietly go to the altar and place the coin on it. "See it all twice, little brother, once for you and once for me" as the little boy walks away in the dark.

The little boy has never heard or seen anything like it, the magnificent Cathedral, the heavenly music, the choir and organ, and the nobles – resplendent in furs and capes and precious jewelry. He watches as one by one they walk to the altar and place their gifts – the coins and precious jewels, but only the sound of the wind in the bell tower can be heard. Finally, the great congregation murmurs and the little boy watches, transfixed, as the king himself, approaches, removes his crown – bright gold, sparkling with precious gems, and places it on top of all the treasures on the altar. Surely now the chimes will ring – but there is only the sound

of the wind. The organ begins the grand recessional. Suddenly, over the music, a sound all have been told about but never before heard, the clear, distinct sound of the chimes high above ringing in the clear night air. Only the nearest had seen a little boy, poorly dressed, place his coin on the altar (*Why the Chimes Rang).*

We heard excerpts from Truman Capote's *A Christmas Memory* a few moments ago. I have no idea whether Capote was a believer. I doubt it. If he was, it was certainly not in any conventional way. He was unusual, to say the least, occasionally bizarre, but he was one of our greatest writers. And in *A Christmas Memory*, he showed that he did indeed understand what Christmas was all about.

With two brilliantly described characters, based on his own childhood, Capote captures the themes of innocence, childlikeness and wonder that are so dear to us.

His friend, a distant cousin, in her 60s suffered a severe childhood sickness and, as a result, is a child still. She has never seen a movie, traveled more than five miles from home, eaten in a restaurant or read anything but the funny pages and the Bible. She and Buddy, Capote – are best friends.

Her simplicity is reminiscent of Jesus' observation one time, holding a child in his arms, that entrance to his Kingdom is gained by becoming like a child, the simple innocence, the guilelessness of childhood.

Her open-hearted generosity – like Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Her living for the time to bake fruitcakes to give away – reminiscent of Jesus' stunning assertion that if you want to really live, no matter who you are, you have to find some way to give your life away.

The story takes us into even deeper waters. It is a major theological assertion of Christianity, and Judaism, that the world is a good and holy place, that creation, in the words of the Book of Genesis, is good – very good – and that God is in it.

The greatest Christian articulation of that idea is in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God… And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Think what that statement says about the flesh the Word became – that our humanity is blessed by God coming into it – that our humanness is blessed by the child of Bethlehem being born into it. The highest anthropology is the Christian doctrine of Incarnation: you and I are not only created in

God's image, but our humanness is the way God chose to reveal himself and the power and eternity of his love, that this world, and our lives in it, are the places where God comes and blesses and makes holy.

And no one ever said that more eloquently than Capote's friend, on Christmas Day.

She and Buddy have had their very modest Christmas and received very modest gifts. They have made kites for each other and as soon as they can get away they find a place to fly their kites and sprawl out in the grass to watch their kites fly and cavort against a clear blue sky.

His friend says: "I've always thought a body would have to be sick and dying before they saw the Lord. And I imagined that when He came it would be like looking at the Baptist window: pretty as colored glass with sun pouring through, such a shine you don't know it's getting dark. And it's been a comfort to think of that shine taking away all the spooky feeling. But I'll wager it never happens: I'll wager at the very end a body realizes the Lord has already shown Himself – that things as they are." Her hand circles in a gesture that gathers clouds and kites and grass and Queenie pawing earth over her bone – "just what they've always seen, was seeing Him. As for me, I could leave the world with today in my eyes."

Thanks be to God.